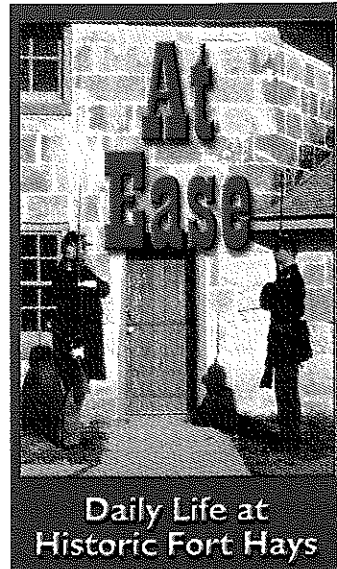


# Healthcare at Historic Fort Hays: The Battle Between Prescription and Patent Medicines

Today we live in a world where pills are touted as panaceas for our maladies: treating the common cold, improving sexual performance, and sedating us into forgetting our problems. However, a growing number of Americans are becoming increasingly disenchanted with this "drug culture" and are turning to alternative medicines and treatments that employ traditional methods and utilize the natural surroundings. This knowledge is as ancient as humankind itself, yet it has taken many different forms from culture to culture, society to society, and person to person. As I found myself asking more questions about traditional healthcare, I turned to the Kansas State Historical Society's archeology lab to begin my



Daily Life at  
Historic Fort Hays

patent and prescription medicines at historic Fort Hays. I was eager to find out how soldiers within a government organization treated themselves—whether the soldiers trusted the prescription medicines offered by the military establishment or the claims of patent medicines.

## Background on Fort Hays

Fort Hays was established in October 1865 and closed in November 1889. The

fort protected travelers on the Smoky Hill Trail. Once trains became the popular mode of transportation, Fort Hays guarded those workers building the Kansas Pacific Railroad from hostiles. Many famous people, including George Armstrong Custer and 1880 presidential candidate General Winfield Scott Hancock, visited Fort Hays.

## Healthcare at Fort Hays

There were two main sources for healthcare at Fort Hays: the general hospital and the post trader's store. Along with Officers Row, those were the main places that glass bottles were found during the 1970 archeological investigations.

The hospital, which opened with just 33 beds, was enlarged in 1870 to accommodate 44 beds. The addition of only 11 beds raises questions regarding the quality of healthcare. While only six deaths occurred between 1870 and 1871, there were many cases of illness, including 26 cases of intermittent fever and 28 cases of diarrhea and dysentery. The amount of illness reported was very minimal, which led me to wonder how many of the soldiers were treating themselves rather than seeking help from the hospital doctors.

The only other place where medicines were available was the post trader's store, which sold patent medicines, as revealed by the types of glass bottles found at the store. The store consisted of the trader's living quarters and separate rooms for the officers and enlisted men where they could buy alcohol and enjoy a



(Left) Hoyt's German Cologne, E. W. Hoyt & Co., Lowell, Mass. The company's advertisement claimed, "Superior for the Handkerchief, Refreshing for Invalids, Unqualified for the Toilet, Complexion and Bath."

(Above) Assorted patent medicine bottles.



(Above) Assorted prescription bottles.

(Right) Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root Kidney, Liver & Bladder Remedy, Binghamton, NY.

(Below) Assorted cologne bottles.



game of cards or billiards. The store sold everything from medicines to hats and blankets to satisfy the fort's occupants.

## Nineteenth-century Medicine

During the nineteenth century, there were many popular forms of healing. Some have carried into the twenty-first century, while others simply lost popularity. Some healing techniques of the early-nineteenth century were considered "heroic medicine;" cupping, purging, sweating, and administering toxic (and sometimes addictive) drugs were used. This was also the time when botanic medicines, homeopathy, and chiropractic healing all became popular. At Fort Hays, healthcare never incorporated the "heroic medicines" but rather concentrated on elixirs or patent medicines.

Because I focused mainly on glass bottles, I was left to compare the difference between prescription and patent medicines. In the 1850s, patent medicines infiltrated the market with a catalogue of over 1,500 elixirs. Some remedies might have been helpful; however, others were just sugar water and flavoring, providing only a placebo effect. Even though some elixirs contained plants of pharmacological value, many doctors over- or under-prescribed them, causing many problems with the doses.

An interesting study shows that the human body can cure itself 80 percent of the time, so charlatans selling patent medicine had biology on their side!

The doctors of the time doubted the effectiveness of the elixirs, claiming that those who self-dosed might kill themselves inadvertently, as their knowledge was limited. However, during this time period consulting a doctor was so costly and the therapy was so brutal that cheap and relatively successful patent medicines were popular.

## Artifact Analysis

I documented a sample of 247 bottles, including 33 cosmetic bottles and 214 medicine bottles. More specifically, there were 96 prescription medicine bottles, 84 patent medicine bottles, and 24 chemical bottles.

Within the houses on Officers' Row,

the following bottles were found: 28 patent medicine bottles, 27 prescription bottles, 20 cosmetic bottles, and 7 chemical bottles. The bottles recovered from this area indicate that there was a balance between self-healing and seeking medical treatment.

The hospital yielded 47 prescription bottles, 24 patent medicine bottles, 5 chemical bottles, and 2 cosmetic bottles. The store had 10 prescription bottles, 4 patent medicine bottles, a cosmetic bottle, and a chemical bottle.

I was astonished that trust was placed about equally in the hospital and the store. The trader was in no way a healthcare provider—just a distributor—whereas the hospital doctors were trained healthcare providers. I believe that certain groups of people chose the

Continued on page 9

instead, he confined his efforts to watching the excavations and commenting on the work—and his comments were not always of a supportive nature. For example, Shippee's entry for 19 October states, "A. T. sits on a stool all day and looks on. His comments and suggestions are not always conducive to good feeling and good work." Shippee underlined phrases only when he felt strongly about something, so he certainly must have been unhappy with Hill on that particular day. Unfortunately, there was little he could do about it, for Kivett and Hill apparently sided together on issues, as Shippee's entry for the following day indicates: "This morning I had to dig and not talk for the Nebraska clique was clicking perfectly."

Despite the apparent animosity, Shippee and Hill roomed together in a rented house in Woodruff. On 21 October, the crew expanded with the hiring of a local farmboy, seventeen-year-old Carol Franke. It is truly unfortunate that this fact did not emerge earlier in our search for the ossuary, as Franke obviously would have been the ideal informant for telling us the location of the site. Sadly, he died only a couple of years ago, thus closing that avenue of opportunity.

More could be said about Shippee's notes, but the main point to be considered here is his description of the site location. The area west of Woodruff that had been delineated by our KAA informant was clearly not the spot; according to Shippee, the site was almost due north of Woodruff.

## Remembrances of an Eyewitness

Just before learning about Shippee's field notes, my informant from west of Woodruff informed me that he had found someone who had actually seen the 1946 excavations: John Knape, who was eight years old at the time the investigation took place. As if that were not enough, I also learned that John owns the land on which the site is located. A phone call to John soon revealed the story. In 1946 John's father farmed the field east of the site. Because they could see the activities going on at the site, the Knapes naturally took an interest in the excavations and often visited to see what had been found. They were not the only ones; according to John, the archeologists' presence in Woodruff caused quite a bit of "excitement" in town, as might be expected for such an unusual occurrence in such a small town.

Later, when I showed Shippee's notes to John, some surprising coinci-

dences emerged. For one thing, John's grandmother owned the house that Shippee and Hill rented. We were amused at Shippee's description of her as a "chiseling old store keeper woman," because she charged so much (two dollars a day) for what Shippee considered to be "a damned old wreck of a house." Not surprisingly, it was A.T. Hill who had made the arrangements.

I was delighted to learn that John owns the land on which the site is located, thus solving the problem of getting landowner permission for survey. We agreed to visit the site as soon as possible and in July 2004, due to yet another coincidence (a highway project just outside of Woodruff), John and I finally were able to join forces and inspect the site. I was happy to find that John's memory of the site coincided nicely with Shippee's notes; the spot John took me to was located almost directly north of Woodruff.

Often I have had a site informant say, "I can take you right to it" and then offer that embarrassed refrain, "Gee, I don't know, everything looks different than I remembered it." But in this case, there was no hesitation and no questioning of the situation. John took me straight out to the spot he remembered and then proceeded to point out the exact location of the ossuary and the tents (probably used for camping during the August testing investigation) that were erected nearby.

Strangely, we found some discrepancies between Knape's location and the distances from the state line listed by both Kivett and Shippee. Kivett's distance was half of that delineated by Knape, and Shippee's was half the distance listed by Kivett. With Shippee and Kivett being so different in their estimates, however, I am inclined to place my belief in Knape's location, especially since it matches some of the other landscape descriptions recorded by both Shippee and Kivett. In addition, a close examination of the photographs in Kivett's report reveals one other problem: the distant shot of the site (Plate 16a) is clearly a reversed image. Errors did occur in the reporting of the site. In the end, I am confident that the spot on which I stood with John Knape is, in fact, the location of the ossuary.

Today, there is nothing to see of this once-rich site. Rows of soybeans march across the site and between the rows there is no hint of the ossuary or of the 1946 excavations. Whatever was missed in the excavations seems to have been picked up by artifact collectors. If not for Mett Shippee's notes and John Knape's memory, the Woodruff Ossuary would remain a "lost" site.

## Healthcare at Fort Hays

*Cont. from page 6*



**Prescription bottle from C. Lewis Diehl, Lewisville.**

store over the hospital, or vice versa, based upon socialization. Because the store offered a place to drink and socialize, this interaction would encourage soldiers to further trust the store to provide cheap and adequate medicines.

The relatively low death rate throughout the duration of the fort seems to indicate that the soldiers benefited from balanced health treatment, knowing to place their trust in the hospital when patent medicines were not effective against certain illnesses. This pattern is not new in society—there always has been knowledge about plants and natural means of healing—however, it does show that in the past there have been more balanced methods of integrating new information. Evidence such as this can help modern society learn that there is no single way of treating disease or doing anything. Due to diverse and readily available methods of healing, sickness at historic Fort Hays was controlled and the death rate was very low.

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